

Santa Cruz County
2018 Annual Report on Homeless Deaths
Summary of available data on homeless deaths in Santa Cruz County
For the period December 20, 2017 – December 20, 2018

Homeless Persons' Health Project (HPHP)
A program of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency

Background

In keeping with a tradition established in 1999, once again this year on December 20th homeless individuals, our community and family members, and homeless service providers will come together to honor the lives of those who died this year while homeless. The 2018 Annual Report on Homeless Deaths and our local homeless memorial event represent our community's twentieth year of collecting and reporting data on homeless deaths across Santa Cruz County. Our memorial is one of many occurring across the nation to mark the beginning of winter, a time when the dire consequences of homelessness are most starkly evident.

Discussion of 2018 Homeless Deaths:

Based on all reported deaths, the total number of people who died while homeless this year in Santa Cruz County is 55. The total number reported last year (2017) was 52, and the average number of homeless deaths per year over the preceding ten years (2008-2017) was 36. The average age at death for 2018 is 55.8, which is about 3.5 years higher than the average age of death for homeless individuals in Santa Cruz County during the previous ten-year period. The average life expectancy for all Americans is 78.7, and this means that people who died while homeless in our community did so almost 23 years earlier than might otherwise be expected. Of note seven of the people who died homeless in Santa Cruz County were over 70 years of age (13%).

87% of the people who died were male and 13% female. 13% were known to be Veterans. 45% of those who died were outdoors or in a vehicle, another 45% were in a hospital or skilled nursing facility, and 10% were in a temporary residence, motel, or shack. Acute intoxication/overdose was the primary cause of death for 29% of those who died, with another 6% of deaths listing chronic alcohol or drug use as a primary cause of death. Traumatic injury was the primary cause of death in 13% of cases, including three instances where the decedent was struck by a motor vehicle, two drownings, and two fatal falls. Seven of the deaths were from coronary disease (13%), four from sepsis (7%), three from cancer (5%), two each from renal failure and gastrointestinal bleeds (4%). Environmental exposure was listed as the primary cause of death for one person. The cause of death for 15% of those who died is either still pending with the coroner's office (6 people) undetermined (2 people).

The inherent trauma of homelessness causes, complicates and exacerbates serious health problems. It leads to the premature deaths of thousands of people across our nation every year. The longer homelessness is endured, the greater the impact on health. Research in the U.S. has shown that homeless persons have up to a threefold increase in mortality when compared to the general population, (Hibbs1994). Studies document an average age of death among homeless populations that ranges from 42 to 52 years (O'Connell, 2005), while average life expectancy for most Americans is almost 79.

How data on homeless deaths are collected:

Throughout the year, a public health nurse at HPHP maintains a log of deaths that occur among people who are homeless in Santa Cruz County. The log includes information on confirmed deaths of HPHP clients, as well as confirmed reports of deaths received from other homeless service organizations, medical providers, the Coroner's office, the County Office of Vital Statistics, the County Public Administrator's office and friends or family members of those who have died.

The data available from this process most likely under-represent the number of homeless deaths in the county. Housing status at the time of death is neither well documented nor always easily determined. Also, information on likely factors leading to death is imprecise, and the cause can be unknown at the time of death. For the sake of summarizing the information, we have assigned a single primary contributing factor to each death, but in many cases, there are multiple, significant factors that have contributed to an individual's death.

For this reason the data provided in this summary should not be interpreted as a definitive accounting of deaths among the homeless population in our county. Instead, this reflects our best effort at this time to collect and analyze accurate data on homeless deaths in a way that is meaningful to our community, to homeless service providers, and to the friends and family of those who have died.

About the Memorial:

Our purpose in preparing and distributing this report at this time of year is three-fold. First, we wish to honor and mark the passing of all those who died while homeless in our community during the last year. Second, we strive to document and increase awareness of the serious and negative impact of homelessness on the lives of our fellow community members. Finally, we reflect upon and re-commit ourselves to the work that is left to be done in our county to prevent so many unnecessarily and unjustly early deaths each year.

Our memorial service includes a reading of the names of the 55 people who were homeless at their death and are reflected in our annual report. We will also read the names of an additional 17 individuals who were previously homeless and died this year, but who were either out of county or housed at the time of their death. Many of these individuals were homeless for long periods of time during their lives. We invite people to add names to our list of anyone we may have overlooked.

Nearly all of the people who died this year were known personally to one of us at the River Street Shelter, the Homeless Services Center, HPHP, or to one of our colleagues at homeless service organizations in Watsonville and elsewhere in the county. We are often shocked and always saddened by their deaths. We will miss each person who has died. We hope that this information and this memorial event will serve to honor the life of each person, to guide us in our ongoing efforts to improve the health and quality of life for all who experience homelessness, and to recommit ourselves as a community to ending homelessness in Santa Cruz County.

**DEATHS AMONG HOMELESS PEOPLE IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
DECEMBER 20, 2017 – DECEMBER 20, 2018**

1) TOTAL NUMBER OF HOMELESS DEATHS: 55

2) GENDER

Male: 48

Female: 7

3) AGE

Under 21: 0 41-50: 9 over 70: 7

21-30: 1 51-60: 21

31-40: 5 61-70: 12

Average age at death: 55.8

4) RACE

White: 41

Hispanic: 9

Native American: 1

Black: 4

5) LOCATION AT TIME OF DEATH

Outside/Vehicle:	25	Santa Cruz:	40
Hospital:	19	Watsonville:	10
Skilled Nursing Facility:	6	Mid-County:	2
Temporary Residence/Other:	3	San Lorenzo Valley:	2
Motel	2	North County:	1

6) MOST LIKELY PRIMARY FACTOR LEADING TO DEATH

Acute Drug/Alcohol Intoxication: 16

Other Chronic Substance Use: 3

Trauma: 7 (struck by vehicle = 3; drowning = 2; fall = 2)

Cardiac Disease/Failure: 7

Sepsis: 4

Cancer: 3

Acute Renal Failure: 2

Gastrointestinal Bleed: 2

Pulmonary Embolus: 1

Small Bowel Infarction: 1

Environmental Exposure: 1

Undetermined/Pending: 8